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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BY FREDERIC TABER COOPER, THOMAS WALSH AND CLAYTON
HAMILTON.

"THE PRINCESS."*

MARGARET POTTER is one of those authors whom it seems worth while to discuss seriously, not so much on account of their achievement, as because of the potential force they have revealed that promises still greater things in the near future. The value of her productions up to the present day, inclusive of her latest volume, "The Princess," is to be determined only by boldly striking a balance between their many obvious merits and equally obvious faults. There is a spectacular quality about her style, an Oriental vividness of verbal coloring that draws attention like the flamboyant contrasts of an artistic poster. And when the reader's attention is once drawn and held, he finds that underneath the surface glow and glitter there is a drama in the course of enactment that is throbbing painfully with tense human passions,—a drama not merely original, but of purposed audacity. These, then, are Mrs. Potter's chief assets: a fertile invention and fearless handling of unique situations; a rush and sweep of word and phrase which seem often to symbolize the pent-up flood of emotions it interprets; and most important of all, because herein lies the chief hope for her future work, a very real and frank recognition of the basic, primordial human passions and weaknesses, an ability to make us conscious of the warring elements of flesh and spirit in every man and woman.

Having conceded these gifts, one must add the qualifying comment that Margaret Potter does not always make the best use of

* "The Princess." By Margaret Potter. New York: Harper & Brothers.

them. Instead of controlling her very uncommon power and fertility of language, she often gives it too free a rein. She has not yet learned the forcefulness of restraint and simplicity. Her flow of words seems always under a certain hydraulic pressure. In picturing life, she deliberately chooses exceptional types, those who live upon the heights, who occupy the seats of the mighty. She holds a mirror up to nature, but it often suits her purpose to select a mirror with a curved surface, which curiously magnifies and exalts certain characters, and changes the perspective and the focal point. She needs the accessories of royal robes, the pomp and splendor of the throne-room, the prerogatives of despotic power, to gain her best effects. She prefers to hold our interest by the force of contrast, rather than to make her appeal to the ultimate kinship of human hearts.

"The Princess," which furnishes the excuse and the justification of the present analysis, represents the highest achievement of its author yet given to the public. Announced as the second volume of a trilogy of Russian life, which began with "The Genius," it is easily a long step in advance of the earlier volume. The background of the story, not merely the nomenclature of streets and buildings, but the pervading sense of a social system and an ethical code differing essentially from our own, is drawn in with a sureness of touch that reveals not merely the patient hours of faithful study and careful documentation, but also that inborn gift of reconstruction, that instinct for visualizing distant lands or vanished epochs. And to understand how helpless mere knowledge may be, without that further gift, one need only recall those soulless productions of erudition, Becker's "Charicles" and "Gallus."

Of the plot of "The Princess," it does not seem necessary to speak here in detail. It is too big, too complex, too panoramic, to lend itself readily to a brief retelling. The action passes within the imperial circles of modern Russia; much of it, indeed, within the threshold of the imperial palace. The various members of the reigning house pass in and out of the story, each of them sketched in with bold confidence, and each impressing you, as you read, that they are real people, with real emotions and not at all the conventional lay figures of the usual historical novel. The central theme of "The Princess," as the foreword explicitly states, is the Loneliness of the Great, the price that royalty has to pay, in

standing aloof from the multitude and solving the riddle of creation alone and unaided. And the specific case which Margaret Potter has selected to illustrate her theme is the life of a certain Russian princess, who having, through long years of wedded misery, borne proudly and silently the degradation of a husband's cruelty and neglect and open infidelity, must begin over again the same silent struggle in the case of her son, whom she cannot with all her love keep from the vileness of the life his father led before him, nor from the wretchedness of a loveless marriage like her own. The book has in it a certain strain of mysticism, a strange visitation from time to time of a dead and gone musician, whom her readers will recall as having played the leading rôle in "The Genius." This reincarnate spirit, who comes again and again to the Princess in her hours of bitterest need, to warn her how she may avoid the doom hanging over those dear to her, may be taken seriously, or as a mere figment of her brain. But in either case, what the author wishes to drive home is the fact that, for those who endure the Loneliness of the Great, it is impossible, even though a warning may come to them from the dead, to break away from the trammels of custom, to be untrue to the prescribed code of their order.

There is one other thought which it seems worth while to express in connection with "The Princess," and that is in regard to what is conventionally regarded as a proper or improper subject for current fiction. As already intimated, the book handles with the greatest frankness the phases of life which are an inevitable consequence of the profligacy of the mighty. And there is no very good reason why it should not, so long as it treats life honestly and fearlessly. And yet, such are the conventions that regulate the propriety of the novels we read, that if Margaret Potter had chosen to lay her scene in New York and attribute to American men and women one tithe of the frailties that she assigns to titled Russians, the book would have called forth a vigorous protest. And this is a pity, because it simply compels a novelist like Mrs. Potter, who has something definite to say about the basic facts of life, to leave her own country and wander far afield for her stage-settings, which must always have in them something of the artificial, the exaggerated, the spectacular. Nevertheless, Margaret Potter is one of the younger novelists to-day who display a healthy and vigorous talent, and one who is eminently worth watching.

She seems just now to be at the parting of the ways. She belongs to the school of romantic fiction, and at present stands somewhere, let us say, between the talent of a George Sand and the sensationalism of a Cuida. The next year or two ought to show definitely in which of the directions she will ultimately turn her path.

FREDERIC TABER COOPER.

WRIGHT'S "LIFE OF WALTER PATER."*

THERE can be no gainsaying Walter Pater's preeminent interest to the student of literature, and so far as his personal history bears upon the processes of his thought and expression, investigations such as those pursued by Mr. Thomas Wright in his recent "Life of Walter Pater" have a distinct value. Nevertheless there is much that seems unnecessary and diffuse in these volumes: the biographer places too great a reliance upon the cumulative effect of unimportant conversations and recollections, and his anxiety to see Pater through the eyes of certain of his early friends promotes a sense of uneasiness in the reader lest there should be another side to many of these stories.

Mr. Wright purports to show us the real Pater—an unprepossessing boy whose retired disposition could be partly accounted for by his descent from a long line of Roman Catholics of Dutch origin who lived secluded from their neighbors in Buckinghamshire. He grew up amid a refined parsimony which showed itself in his later character in an abiding respect for the advantages of birth and prosperity. From the beginning we find him "playing at priest": a visionary boy full of the "lust of the eye" for all things beautiful, an exceeding horror of suffering, and an affection for cats.

At the King's School, Canterbury, he shows himself to be "essentially a monk—sometimes an ascetic and painfully devout monk, sometimes a mocking, sceptical monk." Mr. Benson has declared that Pater was popular among his schoolmates: his new biographer finds that they considered him a hopeless milksop, while he regarded them as barbarians. Snowballing, it seems, filled him with terror: he did not care for blackened eyes, nor for the pet snakes of his associates.

At Oxford, where he had won an exhibition, a marked revulsion

* "The Life of Walter Pater," by Thomas Wright. Two volumes. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.